"Being part of something much bigger than self": the community play as a model of implicit and explicit political theatre practice.

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This article focuses on the community play, as conceived by Ann Jellicoe, as a form of political theatre-making. Examining two community play productions: *Drummer Hodge* (2014) and *Love on the Dole* (2016), I explore how the form's theatrical conventions combine with the play's content to generate political action. Discussing how the community play has been under-theorised in applied theatre literature, I argue that the form can bring together the more celebratory aspects of community that are present in applied theatre discourses, with explicit political motivations to create political practice in the context of 21st century austerity.

Keywords: community play; Ann Jellicoe; political theatre; community theatre; protest

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Introduction

The end of the summer of 2017 saw the passing of playwright and director, Ann Jellicoe. Jellicoe's legacy in both professional and community theatre is significant, and perhaps her most noteworthy contribution was formalising a specific model of community theatre, the community play. Originating in Lyme Regis in 1978, Jellicoe's model has been replicated across the UK and internationally, with many prestigious political playwrights and theatre makers being part of the phenomenon, such as David Edgar, Howard Barker and Arnold Wesker. At the same time, the community play has been criticised in theatre literature and under-discussed in applied and community discourses and practices, despite its continued production and proven longevity.

This article will use two examples of community plays to argue for its significance as a form of political, community theatre-making. Discussing two companies that use the model, Dorchester Community Plays Association and Salford

Community Theatre, I will demonstrate how community plays can be implicitly or explicitly political. By this I define implicit as the play raising political questions or challenging existing orthodoxies. Explicit I define as the play directly demonstrating a political ideology that motivates political action. In both cases, a political efficacy is produced through the combination of the play's theatrical conventions with political content. These two companies, based in very different geographic locations in the United Kingdom, produced two quite contrasting pieces of work. However, both followed the Jellicoe model in theatrical form, process and production of the project. In this article I draw on the theories of Nancy Fraser and Jonothan Neelands to argue that the community play can be political by considering injustices of both redistribution and recognition.

I was first introduced to the community play when I was assistant director on the Chester Mystery Plays in 2013. Here I met playwright Stephanie Dale, who had previously worked for Dorchester Community Plays Association (DCPA) on *A Time To Keep*, a play she co-wrote with David Edgar. Subsequently, I went to see their 2014 production of *Drummer Hodge* and then over the next two years I set up Salford Community Theatre (SCT), writing and co-directing the first production, *Love on the Dole* (an adaptation of the novel by Walter Greenwood) in 2016. It is these two plays that I will discuss in this article, largely because of my own closeness to these productions, allowing first-hand analysis of the performances, and because they were performed within two years of each other. Furthermore, the comparison allows a discussion of how community plays can produce politics both implicitly and explicitly in very different locations. I enter this discussion with an awareness of this personal and emotional attachment to both pieces.

In both examples I was to some extent an outsider to the play and community. This itself was unbalanced: I was in many ways much closer and much more 'inside' the production of *Love on the Dole*, mainly because I was the writer and co-director of the piece. I am not from Salford but spent over two years meeting and spending time with Salfordians, working with them both in the rehearsal process and in the research, organisation and other production aspects. In Dorchester I was nearly a complete outsider, neither involved in the play nor from the area. My connection to Dorchester came from an artistic connection to the form more than anything specific to this location or play. Yet, in this article I demonstrate how in both cases I ceased to be an outsider, not simply through a transition to the position of insider, but because of the undermining of this binary that both plays achieved.

Political Efficacy of Community Theatre: recognition and redistribution

The community play model has been replicated across the UK as well as internationally. Director Jon Oram, taking over Jellicoe's own company Claque Theatre (formerly The Colway Theatre Trust) alone has produced over 40 community plays, across the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States and Canada. Stereotyped as a middle-class endeavour, only taking place in prosperous towns in the south of England, the community play canon in reality represents a diverse cross-section of British society from its prominence in the 1980s into the present day; with plays in England happening from Devon to Northumbria, and Claque currently in the development process of a play in Aldgate, City of London (as of 2018).

I will briefly outline the Jellicoe model for those unfamiliar. Firstly, a professional playwright is commissioned to write a piece of large-scale theatre that is set in a specific moment of history of the community they are writing for. A local

steering committee is also set up, who help appoint a professional director, production team and recruit the cast of locals. The model, Jellicoe claims, brings all aspects of the community together, allowing anyone who wants to be involved to be involved (for example, the playwright ought to ensure that every member of the cast has a line). In the Jellicoe model there is generally a large cast, normally over 100 community members with additional support backstage or with music. Jellicoe describes how the town is irrigated with creativity (Jellicoe in Kershaw 1992: 176), demonstrating the strong sense of localism that underpins the model. The play itself is generally performed promenade, that is, a non-proscenium space where the audience stand and follow the action, with the actors all around them sharing the same space. This alternative staging practice is combined with a conventional form of plot and character, with distinct protagonists and antagonists (Kershaw 1992: 191-192). On top of this, Jellicoe emphasised the importance of celebration, which is usually established through a pre-show ritual of creating a traditional fair or marketplace. This fair begins the process of welcoming the audience into the world and community of the play (Kershaw 1992: 192).

The community play's legacy is perhaps under-discussed in applied theatre discourses because it is a complicated model when examined through the lens of what is political and ethical in contemporary socially engaged practice. Coming into prominence in the mid-80s, the community play finds itself between the large community theatre endeavours of the 60s and 70s, and the turn to applied theatre in the 90s. On one hand being criticised as elitist, imposing ideas on a community (Edgar 2007), and on the other, being criticised for not being political enough (Woodruff 1989), few critics have identified the political potentiality of the work. Following Kershaw (1992), it is in these very criticisms that we can find the play's political efficacy: in the tension between the professional team and the community, and in

carnivalesque community celebration where unity is presented as the main achievement of the production, meaning that politics are potentially side-stepped.

The relative absence of the community play in applied theatre literature perhaps is related to some of its theoretical underpinnings. Certain aspects of the Jellicoe model, for example the significance of the professional production team in the process, may have excluded the form from what is understood as typical applied practice. Professional artists are employed in applied work to create work with community actors. Yet, there is a distinct ideological shift in the politics of practice being understood in the processes of creating *with*, rather than the politics of the artistic product (though this of course varies across practice). Applied Theatre in my understanding is an umbrella term to encompass a range of practices and discourses correlated to a change of direction in politically motivated or socially engaged theatre-making that emerged in the late 80s and early 90s. Applied Theatre as a term represents a practice that corresponds with a shift in leftist ideology as well as economic changes to arts funding, necessitating a change of direction for alternative theatre from aiming to take theatre to and with the people, to 'creating theatre with a multitude of peoples' (Thompson 2003, xiii). This corresponded with broader changes in political thinking and activism in the 90s, underlined by a form of identity politics that focused on specific interest and identity campaigns rather than grander narratives of socialism and communism. Activists prioritised campaigns around race, gender or sexuality, making the identity question a defining part of the political left. Simultaneously, politically engaged art found a home in focusing on specific examples of social injustice and misrecognition of defined identity groups.

This shift can be explained through what political theorist Nancy Fraser describes as the redistribution / recognition braid. Fraser distinguishes between two

types of oppression or injustice: socioeconomic injustice, which is based in the political-economic structure of society, and cultural or symbolic injustice, which is based in representation, interpretation and communication. She argues that the remedy for socioeconomic injustice is in political-economic restructuring of some sort such as redistributing income or reorganizing labour (1995, 73). She refers to these remedies as redistribution. Cultural or symbolic injustices require remedies of cultural or symbolic change, such as valorising cultural difference, or revaluing disrespected identities. These are remedies of recognition. Through these two distinctions, Fraser raises what she calls the 'redistribution-recognition dilemma'. This is the tension between recognition claims affirming the specificity of identity and accordingly promoting differentiation, and redistribution claims calling for the abolishment of the economic conditions that cause this specificity, accordingly, promoting de-differentiation (Fraser 1995, 74).

Neelands identifies a preoccupation with recognition over redistribution in applied theatre discourses, arguing that, increasingly, applied theatre practitioners appear to be less aligned to socialism and the politics of redistribution and more with 'identity politics' (2007, 312). Neelands argues that Fraser's description of a politics of recognition, where mis-recognized identities are re-represented through the maligned group's own constructions of self-representation, could easily be compared to practices of applied theatre based on Boalian therapeutic models (2007, 311). Neelands argues that the therapeutic aspects of both applied theatre and identity politics that prioritise the harmful psychological effects of cultural misrecognition displaces the challenges to the economic inequalities that cause social injustice that are integral to misrecognition (2007, 311).

The tension for applied theatre exists in practice that both wants to provide a space of recognition for marginalized groups, at the same time as being part of a struggle to stop this group from existing (by ending redistributive injustices that create marginalisation). Instead of an either/or, Fraser argues for a political engagement that considers both redistribution and recognition. In this sense, the aspects of applied theatre that promote the celebration and empowerment of specific communities could be combined with a theatre practice that aims to question and challenge redistributive injustices in society. Furthermore, this celebration could be the very moment of challenging this injustice, where the community is simultaneously recognised as they resist. The community play, I argue in this article, presents the opportunity for simultaneous celebration and resistance, a play that celebrates a community at the same time as challenging redistributive injustice that causes misrecognition.

Insider / Outsider

To focus just on recognition in community theatre practice arguably would lead to a rejection of the Jellicoe model because the role of the professional playwright or director (an outsider to the community) prevents the work from being concerned with the community's own representation, recognition or identity. The process of writing a script can be interpreted as theatre practitioners depositing work 'on top' of a community, not allowing a community to define itself. David Edgar describes how the Jellicoe model has been accused of blandness, elitism, and of focusing on production quality over the participatory process:

> To her critics, Jellicoe's system involved airlifting in her professional team, imposing their vision of the town and its history on the local population, and moving on, leaving behind only empty pizza boxes and the odd broken marriage (Edgar 2007).

The use of a professional artistic team of playwright and director can be read as elitism, where the artist from outside of the community forces their artistic or political vision onto a community. Jeffers for instance argues that community plays in Northern Ireland, undertaken presumably to unite communities in the context of sectarian tension, failed to lead to positive social change if they did not also question the authority and authorship of the existing elite, including the artists: the redistribution of authority (Jeffers 2017: 210-218). In the examples Jeffers discusses, this concerns the authority one has to represent, whether the playwright has the authority to represent the community in a way that they want to be represented, and whether the community actors have the authority to self-represent within the boundaries of the playtext (2017: 216). Jeffers argues for community theatre to consider the creation of work as more collaborative, where there is an exchange of different kinds of authority and experience by both the artists and the community (2017: 220).

Jeffers argument demonstrates the need for community plays to be underpinned by collaboration to begin tackling broader social problems that affect the locality. Yet, it is important to state that collaboration can still happen in plays largely artistically shaped by a playwright and/or director. Kershaw describes this possibility through Eugenio Barba's term 'barter', that skills and experience are exchanged through the process to achieve equality within the production, arguing that that there is a possibility for such a balance of power within the Jellicoe model (1992: 193). But further than this, there is political assumption underneath the suspicion of a professional team in community theatre practice influenced by the concept of recognition. This depiction of the community play assumes that there is an inherent insider / outsider relationship between the community and the theatre-maker. Here, the theatre-maker imposes their ideas of good practice onto the always marginalised, vulnerable community, enforcing a

dominant narrative that accordingly denies the community their right to be recognised. This sets up a situation in which the oppressor/oppressed binary becomes a permanent feature of the rehearsal space, where the theatre-maker is the oppressor with participants as oppressed. Neelands writes:

> A[pplied] T[heater] practitioners often cast themselves as 'outsiders'… who can appear in the discourse to be more concerned with erasing their morally relative and authoritative influence on some of the groups that they work with. They see their outsider status as an ethnographic problem of interpretation rather than as a political problem of action (Neelands 2007, 309).

A fixation on the problems of insider / outside premises practice entirely on injustices of misrecognition, rather than considering broader cultural and economic problems by which we are all effected. There is a danger of fixating on the outsider (e.g. the director or playwright) as the symbol or even cause of injustice, rather than wider structural problems, e.g. class, race or gender inequalities; austerity and poverty or democratic freedoms that are collectively significant to all involved.

How communities are defined in some applied theatre discourses is also relevant to the Jellicoe model. Nicholson demonstrates how communities of location can foster and reinforce a sense of localism, excluding people from outside the local community, where community acts as a 'powerful means of exclusion, separating 'us' from 'them'' (2005, 84). This potential conservatism of localism accounts for a paradigm shift in applied theatre from communities of location to communities of identity, 'where the ideal of community has been de-territorialised and allied to mobility rather than stability, to the possibility of multiple identities rather than those simply inscribed through geographical location' (2005, 84). Furthermore, Nicolson argues that drama projects that focus on uncomplex constructions of local identity and common ideologies of that local community at the exclusion of diversity or difference are likely 'to

reinforce the more conservative images of 'otherness' sometimes associated with localism' (2005, 84). In this sense, there is a tendency for applied theatre practice to focus on a specific community of identity that may be marginalized within their community of locality.

If a theatre project is premised on the affirmation of a certain identity however, to what extent can a participant participate apart from this identity? The existence of a project specifically aimed at an identity group surely presupposes some kind of commonality. Accordingly, the uncritical celebration of identity is no less problematic with groups of identity than with groups of locality: both are in danger of presenting a homogenous and essentialized account. The question I believe becomes to what extent does the principle of uniting a geographic community ignore or challenge social and cultural differences? Does this principle automatically overlook or ignore marginalised people or inequalities within a community in order to present an image of a unified locality? Are oppressed voices being further marginalized through lack of recognition? Or, through bringing together different communities of identity, can it begin to challenge the existence of these differences in a way that a pluralist position could only celebrate?

It is because of the community play model's propensity to challenge injustices of both redistribution and recognition that this problem of localism can be approached: through the ability of the plays to both celebrate community, and demonstrate how the existing structures of the community can be undermined, resisted or even destroyed. I will argue through analysing these two very different examples of community plays, how this can be done in diverse ways, depending on the kind of community that produced the play. With Dorchester Community Plays Association, through approaching politics implicitly, the community play begins to question the boundaries

and borders of community, subsequently questioning its held truths. With Salford Community Theatre, the community play as explicit political action can challenge and resist the social and economic injustices that affect the community.

Dorchester Community Plays Association

In 1985, playwright David Edgar was approached by Ann Jellicoe to write a community play for the town of Dorchester. The result was Edgar's play *Entertaining Strangers* and the formation of the Dorchester Community Plays Association. It would be based on the model that Ann Jellicoe had first formulated in Lyme Regis in 1978 with her play *The Reckoning*. Originally written as a play for a comprehensive school, the performance developed into a 100 cast promenade performance with help from an Exeter-based theatre company, Medium Fair. Jellicoe had created a model which she claimed brought the whole community together, allowing anyone who wanted to be involved to be part of the play in some way. Uniting the town, rather than dividing it, was the main principle for Jellicoe (1987, 17). Furthermore, as Edgar writes, Jellicoe's model:

> provides the sense of an event not just of commitment and energy but of moral force and artistic scale… an event of sufficient size and space to encompass both the most high aesthetic endeavour and the most untutored communal enthusiasm; not community or art but the two together (Edgar 1985, 1).

Including *Entertaining Strangers* there have been six community plays in Dorchester. DCPA as an organization is community-led and run by a board of local people that commission and employ the writer, director and other members of the production team. *Drummer Hodge*, the first community play I will examine in depth, took place at the Thomas Hardy School in April 2014. Written and directed by Rupert Creed, it follows the story of a working-class boy (Will Hodge) who volunteers for the army during the Boer war, and subsequently tries to expose the atrocities of the treatment of Boer

women and children to his home town, leading to his death. Based on a Thomas Hardy poem, it also depicts Dorchester in the early 20th Century as a town on the brink of cultural, political and economic change, with the growing suffragette movement, the general election of 1906 and industrial innovations.

Politics as Divisive

Jellicoe, in her wish to keep the town unified, instructed the playwrights she commissioned to stay away from explicitly political material. Against the backdrop of 1980s Britain as a country of deep political division (Kershaw 1992, 168), the community play, for Jellicoe, should be an opportunity to bring people together, rather than replicate those highly charged divisions:

> We do not see our role as telling people what they should think politically, or any other way. We consider this would be arrogant; it would also alienate half of the community. We are trying to build communities, not divide them (Jellicoe 1987, 27).

Simultaneously, Jellicoe was commissioning playwrights such as Howard Barker and David Edgar, known primarily for their socialist politics and political work. Barker and Edgar were instructed to find more implicit ways to make political points, for instance, Barker was told to focus on the celebration of resistance in his play *The Poor Man's Friend* (Jellicoe 1987, 17). Similarly, in *Entertaining Strangers* the focus became the cholera epidemic and the capacity for solidarity across the town united against this force. Jellicoe celebrated the process of the community play for its ability to undermine social differences. Edgar and Jellicoe both discuss an anecdote of the joy an employee of the town's main business, the Eldridge Pope Brewery, experienced when his boss referred to him by his first name for the first time because of their joint participation in the play (Jellicoe 1987, 41).

The prioritisation of unity over any possibility of contestation has prompted critiques of the political nature of Jellicoe's model. Woodruff, for example, heavily criticises the model for side-stepping the political divisions that exist within the town and the community:

> Ann Jellicoe appears to think that this formulation of community plays avoids politics. Of course, it does nothing of the kind. It reinforces an idealized notion of community as an unchanging unity. It challenges none of the inequalities which exist in a West Dorset town (Woodruff 1989, 371).

In its attempt to unify, Woodruff argues that the play brushes over the existing inequalities, namely class inequalities, in favour of a quasi-egalitarianism. For example, rather than challenge the Eldridge and Pope brewery boss for not knowing the name of his employee, his new feelings of community celebration were applauded by Edgar and Jellicoe. Woodruff argues that community theatre that wishes to be political should instead be premised on class-relations and class-inequalities with the subject matter pertaining to class struggle.

Though I agree with Woodruff's criticism of the glossing over of social inequality with an unconvincing need for unity above everything else, his analysis focuses purely on the content of the community plays. Through doing this he misses the potentiality of the plays to politically challenge the conservatism or inequality of the community that produces the play, through its *form*. As Kershaw writes, a deeper analysis of the community play as a theatrical form can reveal a more 'radical purpose of questioning' beneath the seeming reproduction of conservative attitudes (1992, 191).

Drummer Hodge and the social actor

Two staging conventions of the Jellicoe model are significant to the production's political efficacy: promenade staging and the 'social actor'. Promenade staging allows

the audience to move around the space following the action and having the option to choose from what perspective they watch. Consequently, the audience and performers share the same space, and as a result the 'audience find themselves surrounded by the action of the play' (Oram 2007, 131). Jellicoe describes promenade staging as a physical theatrical form that reinforces the idea of involvement, meaning that the audience are part of the action (1987, 5). For the participant, too, there is an experience of being part of a crowd. Jellicoe cites Margaret Ansell, a long-term member of DCPA, talking about the 'incredible feeling of being part of something much bigger than self' (1987, 47). Kershaw, discussing Howard Barker's community play *The Poor Man's Friend*, performed in Bridport in 1981, writes how promenade staging allows a type of proximity to the action that prevents us from being distant onlookers and instead makes us feel complicit in the action. As well as this, 'our awareness of other audience members highlights our relationship to the action', meaning that we acknowledge the play as an event bigger than individual interpretation (Kershaw 1992, 198). Furthermore, whether we are 'insiders' or 'outsiders' to this community, we are experiencing and are implicated by the actions in the play, disrupting any monologic accounts of the community that do not allow external challenges (Neelands 2007, 309). The promenade staging encourages external challenges, because the boundaries between internal and external, between insider and outsider, are blurred.

This blurring is further brought about by a second staging convention. This is the concept of the 'social actor', a term suggested by Jon Oram to describe the role of performers specifically in a community play. This is mode of staging in which the actors interact with audience members to bring them into the world of the play. Oram asserts that the potential radicalness of the community play arises from this role, as 'actors who live and work in the community to whom they perform are uniquely placed

to offer something professional actors can't' (2007, 129). All actors in the community play take this role and responsibility, whether they are delivering scripted dialogue or whether they are interacting amongst the audience in crowd or chorus scenes. The social actor's role therefore is of escorting the audience, transporting them from detached observer, to an active member of the community. The social actor invites the audience 'to get involved in the drama as people other than themselves' (Oram 2007, 131). Oram states that this is not simply audience participation, but a gradual and negotiated relationship with the social actor where the audience is brought 'in' through the performance and placed in situations where they are responding to themselves as much as reacting to the plot (2007: 132).

In *Drummer Hodge*, there was a scene where women passed through the crowd asking for donations to the war effort. Watching, I realized that I myself was part of this general 'crowd', the general mass of Dorchester was also me, and the women came to me directly and asked for donations. In this instant, I did not feel like an audience member targeted for some tokenistic audience participation, but a conscious person being asked a moral and political question about whether I should donate to this cause. On the one hand, I felt the pressure of the crowd, who obviously advocated donation, but on the other I wanted to uphold my own principles of not donating to the war. Though in affect I was a double outsider: both outside the world of the play by being an audience member, as well as being from 'outside' of Dorchester, the staging conventions led me to feel 'inside'. For me, this stopped the political dilemmas of the play from being analysed in a distanced way, and instead forced me to answer the questions as an individual on the same moral and political journey as everyone else present in the space.

These questions, therefore, are both presented to the individual and to the community, and the behaviour of an audience member both implicates and is implicated by this community. A more conventional staging, where the actors are separate to the audience, would present a picture of the community that could be examined and analysed from the outside, but is ultimately impenetrable. This would be in greater danger of representing one account of the community, putting it 'beyond critique from and by others whose own image or right to recognition may be affected' (Neelands 2007, 309). Instead, the social actors change our relationship to the action, demonstrating how those outside of the community too can be affected by the actions within it, and are accordingly entitled 'to a voice in the struggle of other subjects and groups' (Neelands 2007, 310). We begin to understand that, following Neelands, 'we are all affected and share the right to freely participate in any struggle that involves us at whatever distance. There is no outside' (2007, 310). In the same way that being an outsider to the narrative of the play was undermined through being implicated in the action, the sense of being an outsider to Dorchester was also questioned. It no longer mattered in terms of my relationship to the politics of the play. In this sense, the radical potentiality of the community play lies in neither the celebration of difference, nor in the ignorance of celebrating unity, but through a combined questioning between the social actors and the audience of difference and of community itself.

Theatre through community, community through theatre in *Drummer Hodge*

The social actor's invitation means the audience's role is not to simply analyse the events of a past community, nor is it just to watch the performances of members of a current community. Rather, their role is within a new community that is formed through and by the performance itself. When, for example, the pacifists organize a meeting to reveal to the town the atrocities happening in South Africa, leaflets are disseminated

amongst the crowd, and we are vehemently entreated to attend the meeting. During the meeting, the audience and performers share the same space to listen to the arguments. Shouts of agreement and disagreement arise from different places across this space, from within the audience of the meeting and the broader theatre audience: they had become one audience. This integration of social actors and the theatre audience as a public attending a meeting meant that I felt a moral compulsion to contribute too to the shouting. In other words, as an audience member I felt an equal responsibility with the performers to shift the commonly held beliefs of the community. This compulsion did not come from the distanced perspective of outsider, but from my own role within a community that I felt part of. The lines between audience and performers became hard to define: we were simultaneously being both audience members who were becoming complicit in the action, and the performers were taking a moment to stop and observe the events.

Kershaw, after seeing a community play in Colyford, describes how the staging makes you feel like you are part of something, rather than just looking at it. He describes the community play as a 'community forming process' where theatre is created *through* community (1983, 115). This is because the fundamental event is not just the play, 'but the opportunity the play provides for the continuing evolution of Colyford as a community' (Kershaw 1983, 115). Extending Kershaw's point, theatre is produced through community, and simultaneously, community is formed through theatre: a temporal community that exists during the performance that has the potential to continue to affect the broader community that put the play on.

However, it is significant that this community that is created by performance disappears once the performance ends: it fades and makes way for a different community when a new audience arrive the next night. *Drummer Hodge,* through

bringing a community into being that then disappears, demonstrated that any fixed or totalising notions of the community of Dorchester, or nostalgias of what Dorchester should be, are temporary. Community is highlighted as something contingent, something that can be formed and un-formed, and any community can disappear as straightforwardly as the community I had experienced in performance. This disappearance challenges the conservatism that might surround terms such as 'local identity', not just by, as Nicholson suggests, 'redefining their actual and symbolic boundaries' (2005, 84), but by undermining that boundaries exist permanently. Significantly, the community play does not simply criticise local identity as something harmful but allows for a simultaneous double-reading where it can be both celebrated and undermined. For example, at the same time as the audience enjoy local celebrations within the play for the Queen Victoria's birthday, they also become aware of how it has been heavily tied to a soldier's commemoration event, which is problematised by the way in which the play depicts what was actually going on in South Africa. As the play progresses, celebration and community solidarity are instead harnessed as resistance against these atrocities. Local identity, what makes the characters and the audience proud to be from 'Dorset soil', *changes*.

This is why, following Kershaw, the form of the community play has radical potential. Kershaw's analysis of *The Poor Man's Friend* describes how a song at the end of the performance could be taken as an ironic and critical exposure of justice and class, or as a celebration of how well the performance went. However, Kershaw (1992, 201) states that both of these readings can exist simultaneously because of how community plays allow authenticating and rhetorical conventions to interact (the former being conventions that locate the audience in reality, and the latter being conventions that establish the kind of theatre event). The celebration of the performance does not

diminish our criticism of the events of the play, or vice-versa. Rather, because the converging of 'real' and 'not real' in a community play become so tightly interwoven, socio-political criticism and community celebration, rather than being exclusive, 'can work to each other's' mutual benefit' (1992, 201). For Kershaw, the 'crucial dynamic for the efficacy of community plays is that the community is being confronted by the community, in large part through the dialectical interaction of celebration and criticism' (1992, 203).

In this sense, shaping a community's identity and sense of self through theatre is not just a matter of recognition. In the right circumstances, it may also be provoking the ideological development of the community by 'prompting a crisis in its identity which may have to be resolved in its 'real' relations in the socio-political present' (Kershaw 1992, 203). This provocation, therefore, can potentially transform the initial account that was given expression, through and by performance. Though the existence of two readings of a play may result in the audience or community simply choosing one reading over the other, the potentiality for subversion created through the community play allows a community that is otherwise written-off as conservative, a role in the production of oppositional culture.

Salford Community Theatre

Salford Community Theatre was set up in 2014 with the aim of creating a community play of Walter Greenwood's novel, *Love on the Dole*. Greenwood wrote largely in response to the growing crisis of unemployment and poverty in places like Salford in the 1930s and much of the novel is drawn from his real-life experiences. Set in Hanky Park, the story follows adolescent brother and sister who negotiate their personal relationships alongside apprenticeships, low wages and eventual unemployment. This narrative meets the historical narrative of Salford's National Unemployment Workers

Movement's (NUWM) 1931 demonstration against the newly brought in Means Test. The Means Test was a way of reducing the amount of people claiming unemployment benefit by making claimants illegitimate if there was already someone in that household who worked. In this sense, it is similar to the contemporary procedure of sanctioning in the United Kingdom, where benefit claimants are penalised for failing to meet agreed upon targets either by having their benefits reduced or stopped. The NUWM called for a mass demonstration against this measure, where thousands of unemployed men and women marched to the Town Hall, demanding a meeting with the Mayor. The demonstration was met with police brutality, violence and mass arrests, and since has been known in the Salford as 'The Battle of Bexley Square'.

Entering a community like Salford, with a proud trade union and labour history, there is much love for Greenwood's work. When we told locals that we were staging *Love on the Dole*, we were often met with the response: "great book, but nothing's changed". Whilst slums like Hanky Park have since been demolished, the poverty, unemployment, and harsh welfare system today are no different for many in this ex-industrial city. Against this backdrop, we decided that the community play could offer the correct theatrical conventions to challenge the present-day injustices that this city faces, through the historical narrative of Greenwood's work. The participants we recruited were local people from Salford, a mixture of ages and backgrounds, largely working-class. Most of the cast had never performed before, with some having never been to the theatre. The audiences who came were largely reflective of the cast: friends and family, similar backgrounds and mostly not regular theatre-goers.

Salford Community Theatre broadly followed the Jellicoe model, in the use of a professional production team and the focus on an event from the community's past. However, the production had a much smaller cast (around 30), and the use of adaptation

rather than an original story altered the writing process. Furthermore, we did not begin the play with a pre-show fair, as it would not fit with the spirit of a 1930s industrial city, but instead created the sense for the audience of entering a factory, helped by our chosen location, an old mill.

In one sense, we the production team were "outsiders". We were not from Salford, even worse, we were from Liverpool, encouraging much rivalry. But that this outsider status was only ever referred to through discussion of accent or football for me emphasised the absence of any resentment. We were outsiders, but we were *there*. We became part of something, an ancillary to the Salford community, a community that was created through the production. In this sense then, I was very much inside, very closely and personally connected to both the play and everyone involved. I felt as much (and perhaps even more) as any company member a powerful sense of community, family and comradeship in that process. Part of what sometimes exaggerates a professional team's position of outsider is their own positioning: being separate to the project, emotional and personal detachment, that it isn't *for them*. It was just as much for me, I was part, part of this something that is much bigger than self.

Love on the Dole and political deliberation

Promenade staging, the social and actor, and a third convention in the community play model, playing with the relationship between the past and the present, were also key components of Salford Community Theatre's production of *Love on the Dole*. I argue that in this production these conventions combined with the content of the piece to produce political action. *Love on the Dole* was performed at Islington Mill in Salford in July 2016. Starting in this ex-industrial mill, the performance moved across the streets of Salford, recreating the NUWM 1931 demonstration in its original location, and ending in St. Phillip's Church. It was this precise relationship between the social actors

and the audience that transformed this demonstration from historical recreation, into present-day political protest.

Politics are central to the plot of *Love on the Dole*. As Harry, the protagonist, navigates his apprenticeship, leading to "full" employment which inevitably leads to being laid off, we are guided through these moments by Larry Meath, a Trade Unionist, who provides a critique of industrial capitalism to underpin the story. Alongside this, we see the different characters in the community react to the worsening economic conditions, as more people lose their jobs, and then eventually, get knocked off the dole (colloquial for the unemployment benefits in the UK).

In our production social actors implicated the audience in these events. For instance, in a scene where Larry was teaching the other workers in Marlowe's factory about the nature of capital and how labour exploitation happens, the audience were not allowed to be distanced observers, but are part of the community of the play who make their own decisions about what he is saying, whether they are on the side of Larry, or the incorrigible worker who insists "You can't do without capital". Larry directly confronted and implicated the audience by directing lines at them too, and other social actors commented and looked to the audience for their thoughts. The political dilemmas of the play therefore were not something the audience watched separately, but were things that everyone in the space had to consider and chose to be part of or not.

Historical parallelism, solidarity and political action

These decisions became crucial as we built towards the reconstruction of the NUWM demonstration. The scene started with Harry Hardcastle being knocked off the dole. Social actors flooded into the space, amongst the audience, demanding to know why they have also been knocked off. The anger built, the voices got louder, the social actors formed a block in the middle that some members of the audience were pulled into,

shouting things like: “We can’t manage as it is” “Two suicides in our street” “You can’t knock us off”. These lines were a mix between the lines in the script, and improvisation from the social actors. Hearing something like “Two suicides in our street” (a line that a social actor improvised) brought the audience immediately to the present and the kind of stories we have heard about suicides due to benefits being cut (Bulman and Polianskaya 2017). This drew a direct parallel between the means test, the reason the NUWM demonstrated, and present-day cuts, or as Kershaw writes, we are made ‘simultaneously aware of the present’ (1983, 115). The shouting reached its peak as one social actor cried: “They daren’t, there’d be a revolution!” At this point a Young Communist character (who Greenwood based on Ewan MacColl) entered the space, telling everyone that outside hundreds of unemployed people are already gathered, and that we’re marching to city hall.

At this point the social actors gathered the audience and took them outside to a meeting point for the NUWM demonstration. They were handed song sheets, placards and red flags, and watched speeches from Larry and other characters, outside, on the public streets of Salford. Here the audience were offered an invitation to perform or be part of something. Their decision to join in with the demonstration was sculpted out of how they have internally responded to the political dilemmas of the play. The unique position of the social actor, both as an actor and a community member, meant that this invitation to join the demo was not an invitation to audience participation, but an invitation to something that could be real. Historical parallelism, combined with the social actor, disturbed separations between the event as a play and the event as a real demonstration. In this recreation, the past is ‘brought vividly alive *in* the present, to establish a powerful feeling of historical continuity’ (Kershaw 1983, 115). Though the

play is set in the past, it is clear how it is simultaneously about the present (Jellicoe 1987, 121).

The past's connection to the present is the craft of the social actor, through their capacity to create solidarity between past and present struggles and between performers and audience. For instance, the perception of what this demonstration is, is based on several layers of solidarity operating simultaneously. There is the real historical narrative of the NUWM demo that we understand through the narrative of the play and is represented in the songs and symbols of some of the real people from the event. On top of this is a level of solidarity that has manifested through performance itself: solidarity between the social actors, playing the roles of the unemployed, and the audience, agreeing to join in this demonstration with them. The audience cease to be an audience watching a play, they become participants in the demo becoming politically active by establishing solidarity with the social actors. In this moment, they are now part of the performance and are viewed as the same by the next layer, the general public watching the demonstration who just happen to be on this road. The general public watch the social actors and audience, who are now in their line of viewing the same event, take part in a demo. For the general public, it is unclear what this event is, there is no necessary indication that it is a play, which means the most obvious conclusion is that it is a demonstration. The general public act and react accordingly, displaying their solidarity. They clap, cheer, cars beep, at one point a group hung out of their flat waving their own red flag. And it is in this moment that it does not matter that the demonstration is part of a play – that does not mean that it is not a real protest: it becomes a real demonstration, interacting with the Salford public in a way that any demonstration would. Layers of community solidarity have created an act of political resistance.

Solidarity, rehearsals and community

What is key to the social actor achieving this relationship with the public, in both examples, is the kind of feelings of solidarity that participants establish with each other through the process of putting on a community play. Applied drama and applied theatre literature places much importance on the rehearsal process, with some applied drama practices only concerned with the process, often not having public performances. Prendergast and Saxton describe rehearsal as a communal and cooperative engagement in a private space where participants can feel confident testing and sharing creative ideas (2013, xii) The drama process is the site of much development and change that participatory theatre is modelled towards. Rehearsal processes develop skills or certain traits, such as confidence, team-work, or communication skills. In some contexts, the process has a strong therapeutic remit, in others, it is about the development of the community rather than specific individuals. Skills are learnt by the individual in relation to others in the process, and in relation to the subject matter or theme that is being investigated through drama (Predergast and Saxton 2013, 2-3)

Yet further than this, I argue that the rehearsal process can be a political process, and accordingly that this process is essential to the political outcomes of the community play. One way in which this can happen is through discussion of the political content of the play, and often the cast of the *Love on the Dole* would talk about the issues of poverty and unemployment in relation to contemporary problems in the city and specific policy. This content can be combined with a political process inherent in the form of rehearsal. By framing therapeutic approaches around the social, a rehearsal process can lead to political action, not just through practicing politics in a literal sense, but also through how the inter-personal relationships in a rehearsal space demonstrate politics. One outcome from the process of making theatre is the sense of collective

responsibility it can generate. Realising the craft of ensemble, of keeping a scene going even though it wasn't you who forgot the line, or the sense of group achievement when a run of dialogue is performed in a way that feels right, all foster a sense of ownership and responsibility for the performance. Jellicoe writes that rehearsals are about individuals learning about their importance within a larger group, and the significance of being a small part of something bigger. The form of a community play makes a precise demand of the skills of being social actors, that is of learning how to be the bridge between action and audience (Jellicoe 1987, 215). In rehearsals, the participants learn how to become social actors and the responsibility that comes with this. They need to learn how to represent the community, how to react and interact on stage when necessary, how to demonstrate where the focus on stage needs to be.

This is a gradual development, a gradual passing over of the piece from the practitioners to the performers. Against an orthodoxy that the participants cannot "own" something that a playwright has written compared to something that participants devise, what the community play demonstrates is how community performers, like any performers, professional or otherwise, learn to own their work. It is in this sense that we can understand community plays as collaborative, to return to Jeffers point (2019, 219), regardless of the structure of a professional production team. But this is not a question of ownership as if the work is property, but rather of ownership as *responsibility*. It is this process of learning collective responsibility that empowers political demands. The kind of bonds created through collective responsibility can be compared to the kind of feelings of community that are developed through collective struggle, through strikes, occupations, and so on. What this demonstrates, is that the aspects of applied and community theatre that celebrate togetherness, unity and ensemble are essential to the political efficacy of the work. In the case of *Love on the Dole*, the NUWM

demonstration was the culmination of both a celebration of the community and a political resistance against the suffering of the community. In this instance, politics were not divisive. Rather, the political act was the very act of unity and community celebration.

This encapsulates what Neelands describes as there is 'no outside' (2007: 307) as well Ansell's description of being part of something bigger than the self. The insider / outsider binary presumes a relationship based on individual identity, that is, I do not identify as being from Salford, accordingly, making me an outsider. But the collective responsibility for the play that is generated in the rehearsal process transcends individual identities uniting individuals towards a common goal. This goal is both aesthetic, the play, as well as social and political, a goal of collective celebration and action. A fixation on insider / outsider undermines this collectivity, undermining the importance of struggles for both recognition and redistribution being connected to broader collective social goals. Each community's collective struggle or celebration is part of something much bigger.

Conclusion

A regular criticism of the community play is that theatre practitioners are parachuted into a community and then leave once the performance is over. At the very least, the longevity of the model proves otherwise. Dorchester Community Plays Association have produced six community plays and looking to produce their seventh in 2020. Rather than artists parachuting into the community, the company is self-run by the community, and theatre practitioners are employed by the community itself. As Edgar writes in his obituary of Ann Jellicoe, the Ansell family's three generations of performers who have participated in every Dorchester community play is a 'prime example of how Ann's community plays changed lives' (2017).

This article hopes to demonstrate how this specific form of theatre can play a role in addressing many of the pertinent political issues that are shaping our time. Jellicoe's legacy is a community play model that can both implicitly and explicitly communicate a political message to audiences. As well as this it can demonstrate in both process and performance a form of collective politics that is absent from everyday life under neoliberalism, as McConachie writes:

> No performance by itself can alter the routines of everyday life, but community-based theatre can provide "what if" images of potential community, sparking the kind of imaginative work that must precede substantial changes in customary habits (2001, 38).

As part of this change, I think the community play challenges a fixation with the identity of the individual in favour of the importance of collectivity, both in terms of identity and representation but also in relation to renewed interest in political movements both in the United Kingdom and globally. Applied and community theatre practitioners should not think of themselves as outside of such struggles. Rather, community theatre is an artistic practice that can play a fundamental part in shaping political struggle, and which, in the process, would not let us forget the importance of celebration.

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